Wesley's 'Warmed Heart' at Aldersgate – What Really Happened?

BY ADMIN | DECEMBER 12, 2020 | 0

By Mark K. Olson. Abstract: Wesley's religious experience at Aldersgate remains the most famous and debated event in his life. Scholars disagree on what the experience meant to Wesley at the time and over his lifetime. This article reviews the common interpretations and offers a fresh perspective by examining what Wesley actually said about the event. For a more detailed study, see the author's monograph, *Wesley and Aldersgate: Interpreting Conversion Narratives.*

Introduction

John Wesley's heart-warming experience at a religious meeting on Aldersgate Street, London, is arguably the most famous event in his life. After thirteen years of focused effort to attain a pure heart before God, Wesley learned in early 1738 that what he lacked was an assurance of salvation. Then on May 24th, he found what he longed for:

"In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's 'Preface to the Epistle to the Romans'. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."[1]

Immediately afterward, Wesley confidently shared his newfound faith with the group, and later that evening he visited his brother Charles and triumphantly exclaimed 'I believe.'[2]

However, in the months that followed Wesley continued to be plagued with doubts over his salvation. In the first two weeks following Aldersgate Wesley repeatedly identified himself as "weak in faith,"[3] largely due to his lack of joy. Throughout the remainder of the year Wesley examined himself on several occasions, only to conclude on January 4, 1739, he was not a Christian.[4] It is the contrast between his confident testimony on May 24th and his lingering doubts over the next several months that have left many asking the question: what really happened at Aldersgate that was lasting and significant in the life of John Wesley?

Interpretations of Aldersgate

The "standard" interpretation has been that Aldersgate was Wesley's evangelical conversion to saving faith in Christ. Over the years this has been the majority view and appears to be supported by a straightforward reading of Wesley's 1738 *Journal* and letters. First, on several occasions leading up to

Aldersgate Wesley confessed his unbelief and his need for conversion and saving faith. On January 24 Wesley wrote in his *Journal*, "I went to America to convert the Indians; but Oh! Who shall convert me? Who, what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of unbelief?"[5] Then, in a letter to a friend Wesley confessed, "I feel what you say for I am under the same condemnation…God is holy; I am unholy. God is a consuming fire; I am altogether a sinner, meet to be consumed. Yet I hear a voice saying, 'Believe, and thou shalt be saved'…O let no one deceive us by vain words, as if we had already attained this faith!"[6] Second, Wesley's initial explanations following Aldersgate support this interpretation. On 30 October Wesley told his older brother Samuel, "By a Christian I mean one who so believes in Christ as that sin hath no more dominion over him. And in this obvious sense of the word I was not a Christian till May 24 last past. For till then sin had dominion over me, although I fought with it continually; but since then, from that time to this, it hath not."[7] So, Wesley's remarks leading up to and following Aldersgate appear to say in clear terms that on May 24 he experienced a conversion to saving faith.

However, throughout the last century a rising chorus of voices, inside and outside of Methodism, have moved to alternative interpretations. This is largely due to the footnotes Wesley added to his 1738 *Journal* that appears to alter his interpretation. Specifically, in the mid-1770s Wesley stated that before Aldersgate he had the *faith of a servant* (one who serves God out of reverential fear) but not the *faith of a son* (one who serves God out of gratitude and love). This has led many scholars and historians to postulate that Aldersgate represents a major step or threshold in Wesley's spiritual journey, but not the moment of salvation. That moment happened either at his baptism as an infant or more likely during his spiritual awakening in 1725, when Wesley made the commitment to pursue "inward holiness."

If Aldersgate was not Wesley's conversion to saving faith, then what does it represent? Here, the answers multiply depending on the interpreter's background and religious tradition. At one end of the spectrum is the view that sees Aldersgate as a non-event. That is, it left little to no impact on Wesley's spiritual or theological development. Theodore Jennings is a representative of this school. He believes the 'standard' interpretation is a myth. Since Wesley experienced doubts about his salvation before and after Aldersgate, Jennings concludes he never really experienced any concrete change on May 24th. This led Jennings to assert that Aldersgate was not a "conversion" in any sense of the term. It was merely a moment, like many others, when Wesley felt a reassurance of God's favour and love.[8] A similar position is taken by the Franciscan priest Maximin Piette. In his work on Wesley's place in the evolution of Protestantism, Piette holds that 24 May played only a "very modest role" in Wesley's life and ministry, and would have been "entirely forgotten" if it had not been included in the *Journal*.[9] Like many who reject the "standard" interpretation, Piette believes Wesley's true conversion took place in 1725 and Aldersgate represents a moment when Wesley felt God's love and peace on a deeper, more personal level.

At the other end of the spectrum are those who see Aldersgate as the moment when Wesley was entirely sanctified. Having been converted earlier, Wesley tasted perfect love for the first time at Aldersgate.[10] David Cubie is a recent advocate of this position.[11] Utilizing Wesley's teaching on the stages of spiritual growth from 1 John 2:12-14 (little children, young men, and fathers), Cubie reasons that Wesley's descriptions of the servant and child in various places represent the same person. Cubie concludes Wesley became a child of God in 1725 when he made his 'mature choice for Christ', and a young man in 1738 when he received the 'abiding' witness of the Spirit and was thereby cleansed and prepared for the ministry.[12]

In the middle are a variety of perspectives. One of the more influential is that of Richard Heitzenrater, who places the accent on personal assurance.[13] Heitzenrater believes what Wesley received on May 24th was not salvation itself, but an assurance of salvation. The importance of this assurance is that it confirmed for Wesley the truthfulness of the new message he had recently learned about justification by faith alone. This empowered Wesley to proclaim to the masses the message of salvation by faith, even though it took him several years to sort through the specifics of his soteriology. Heitzenrater concludes that Aldersgate was 'crucial to the development of a Wesleyan theology' but he is hesitant to call it a conversion experience.[14] Instead, 24 May served as a "significant step in his [Wesley's] spiritual pilgrimage."[15]

Yet, over the last couple decades the "standard" interpretation has been making a comeback. Kenneth Collins and others have continued to argue for a conversionist reading of Aldersgate, maintaining that Wesley understood justification to include a cluster of spiritual blessings, including forgiveness, new

birth, and adoption.[16] Collins defends his conversionist reading in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, in which he adds that Aldersgate "represented an important actualization of saving grace' and 'marked his conversion to the proper Christian faith."[17] Taking an historical approach, Bruce Hindmarsh did a landmark study on conversion narratives in early modern England (16th-18th centuries) and showed that Wesley's narrative of Aldersgate fits within the genre of conversion narratives of the eighteenth century.[18] Very significant is Hindmarsh's analysis of the conversion experience within early Methodism and other branches of the Evangelical Revival. He showed that the core element of conversion in these early testimonies was the experience of assurance, or what Hindmarsh at one point called "a perceptible experience of grace."[19]

More recently, William Abraham looked to Aldersgate for fresh "insights into the epistemology of theology."[20] Although Abraham's interest lies elsewhere than with the subject of conversion, he is quite clear that efforts by recent scholars to 'dislodge' the claim that Wesley was transformed at Aldersgate fail to see its symbolic significance for Wesley and the "pivotal place of conversion in early Methodism."[21] Last, Stan Rodes in a recent PhD thesis on the *faith of a servant*[22] and in an article in the *Wesleyan Theological Journal**[23]* argues at length that Wesley never intended to convey that the servant is either justified or born again. While the servant enjoys a "measure" of acceptance and is no longer under God's wrath, the servant remains in the legal state and does not enjoy a reconciled relationship with God, which includes the Spirit of adoption and the indwelling presence of Christ.[24] Although Rodes does not address what happened at Aldersgate, the implication of his study is that Aldersgate must be seen as the moment when Wesley was justified and born again, since that was the moment when he transitioned from the legal state to the evangelical, from the *faith of a servant* to the *faith of a son*.[25]

Return to Wesley

With so many voices on the subject, we need to return to Wesley and to examine once again what he *actually said* about his experience at Aldersgate. For starters, Aldersgate must be seen against the backdrop of the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival and Wesley's doctrine of salvation. As Hindmarsh has shown, Wesley's peers, like his brother Charles, fellow revivalist George Whitefield and supporters of the Revival, certainly read Wesley's 1738 *Journal* as a conversion narrative.[26] The similarities between Wesley's Aldersgate testimony and the conversion testimonies of other evangelicals at the time cannot be denied. They include:

1. Awareness of guilt and bondage to sin.
2. Realization that a definite inner change is needed.
3. Physical and psychological phenomenon often accompanying the message of salvation.
4. Moment of release when the burden is lifted and faith is received.
5. Resultant feelings of peace, joy, and love filling the heart.[27]

Although Wesley struggled over his lack of feeling, as did many converts,[28] these similarities with other conversion narratives at the time mark Wesley's testimony at Aldersgate as a *conversion narrative*.

In addition, we learned above that conversion was understood by all major wings of the Revival to center on personal assurance of salvation. Late in life Wesley reminisced that during the early phases of the Revival this was a core aspect of the conversion experience:

"Nearly fifty years ago, when the Preachers, commonly called Methodists, began to preach that grand scriptural doctrine, salvation by faith, they were not sufficiently apprised of the difference between a servant and a child of God. They did not clearly understand, that even one 'who feared God, and worketh

righteousness, is accepted of him'. In consequence of this they were apt to make sad the hearts of those whom God had not made sad. For they frequently asked those who feared God, 'Do you know that your sins are forgiven?' And upon their answering, 'No', immediately replied, 'Then you are a child of the devil.' No; that does not follow. It might have been said, (and it is all that can be said with propriety,) 'Hitherto you are only a *servant*; you are not a *child* of God.'"[29]

Around the same time Wesley told Melville Horne,

"When fifty years ago my brother Charles and I, in the simplicity of our hearts, told the good people of England that unless they *knew* their sins were forgiven, they were under the wrath and curse of God, I marvel, Melville, they did not stone us!"[30]

From these quotes we would not want to conclude that assurance was the only component of conversion or salvation which was preached and emphasized during the early phases of the Revival (saving faith, justification, and new birth were also stressed). However, these quotes do point out the central role that assurance did play in the Revival and especially in Wesley's understanding of salvation at that time.[31] With this said, it should not surprise us that assurance comes to the forefront in Wesley's testimony at Aldersgate, for that was the one evidence he looked for to confirm he had saving faith. When we consider the similarities between Wesley's Aldersgate testimony and other conversion accounts at the time, and the central role that assurance played in the conversion experience for evangelicals, we can with confidence conclude that *Wesley did initially see Aldersgate as his conversion to saving faith in Christ*.

What about later in life? Did Wesley continue to see Aldersgate as his conversion? Again, I would propose that he did. First, Wesley continued to publish his account of Aldersgate without adding a single qualifying note to his description of what happened that night (1740, 1743, 1765, 1774, 1775).[32] Second, while he did add footnotes qualifying his earlier assessments of his spiritual condition leading up to Aldersgate, *Wesley never changed, altered, or qualified his testimony of what transpired in his soul that evening in any later edition*. He continued to present it as the moment when he received assurance of salvation by faith in Christ from the guilt and power of sin. Third, he continued to believe it was the moment when he transitioned from the legal to the evangelical state.[33] Fourth, although Wesley did not often use the term "conversion" to describe a person's coming to saving faith in Christ, the fact remains he did use it in his *Journal* leading up to Aldersgate to identify (1) his spiritual need for saving faith and (2) the instantaneous moment when the proper Christian faith is received.[34] Fifth, even if we do not accept all of Rodes' arguments about the *faith of the servant*, he is certainly correct that Wesley continued to identify the new birth and the Spirit of adoption with the *faith of a son*. In the two sermons in which Wesley discussed the soteriological standing and relationship between the servant and the son (*On Faith* and *On the Discoveries of Faith*), it is the son, not the servant, who enjoys the indwelling presence of Christ[35] and the Spirit of adoption.[36] This means that later in life Wesley continued to view Aldersgate as a conversion experience in the sense it remained the moment when he received the witness of the Spirit to his adoption as a child of God and he felt the indwelling presence of Christ.[37] In other words, Wesley continued to believe Aldersgate was the moment when he experienced the new birth and became a child of God in a proper Christian sense of the terms.

Aldersgate: Model & Norm?

Did Wesley see his Aldersgate conversion as normative? That is, did Wesley present it as a model to help guide others who were seeking salvation in Christ? Hindmarsh addressed this question by noting that Wesley attached specific scripture passages to the cover pages of the first three instalments of his *Journal*.[38] In the second instalment, which includes his Aldersgate narrative, Wesley quotes 1 Timothy 1:16 in which the Apostle Paul refers to his own conversion as a "pattern" for those under his ministry:

"For this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting." (KJV)

By applying this text to the published account of his own conversion, Wesley intentionally presented Aldersgate as a model or "pattern" to help guide those seeking the same experience.[39] Therefore, in the *Journal* Aldersgate does serve as a norm for his readership, and helped to refute Moravian Stillness which taught a different doctrine of conversion and saving faith.[40]

Conclusion

Aldersgate represents a very significant milestone in Wesley's pilgrimage of faith and in the development of his career as an evangelist and founder of Methodism. For it was on May 24, 1738, that his heart was strangely warmed and he felt he did trust in Christ alone for salvation. In that moment he received an assurance that his sins were forgiven[41] and Christ had saved him from the power and dominion of sin.[42] For thirteen years he had diligently worked to attain this assurance. At Aldersgate, he received it as a gift of God's free grace. This became his message to the masses. Wherever Wesley travelled over the next fifty-three years he would proclaim what he himself experienced on that May evening—"free salvation by faith in the blood of Christ."[43]

For an in-depth study of this topic, see Mark K. Olson, *Wesley and Aldersgate: Interpreting Conversion Narratives* (Routledge, 2019).

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[1] W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds. *The Works of John Wesley: Journals and Diaries*, vols. 18-24 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988-2003), 18:249-50 (Hereafter: *Works*).

[2] ST Kimbrough, Jr. and Kenneth G.C. Newport, eds. *The Manuscript Journal of the Reverend Charles Wesley, M.A.*, 2 vols. (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2008), 1:111.

[3] 29 May, 6 & 7 June (*Works* 18:253-54).

[4] *Works* 19:29. The four self-examinations were on 14 October, 23 November, 16 December, and 4 January. Critical to Wesley's assessment was his expectation he should bear the fruits of the Spirit in their fullness.

[5] 24 January (*Works* 18:211).

[6] 24 May (*Works* 18:242).

[7] *Works* 25:575. Note the contrast between this letter and what Wesley later published in his *Journal*. In the letter Wesley confidently professes having an authentic and victorious faith, even though he acknowledges it is small, while in the *Journal* he is progressively more and more pessimistic about his spiritual condition until on 4 January 1739 he confesses that he is not a Christian.

[8] Theodore W. Jennings Jr., 'John Wesley Against Aldersgate', *The Quarterly Review* (Fall 1988).

[9] Maximin Piette, *John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1937), 306-08.

[10] For a survey of Holiness perspectives on Aldersgate, see W. Stephen Gunter, 'Aldersgate, the Holiness Movement, and Experiential Religion', in Randy L. Maddox, ed. *Aldersgate Reconsidered* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1990), 121-31.

[11] David L. Cubie, 'Placing Aldersgate in John Wesley's Order Of Salvation', *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 24 (1989), 32-53.

[12] Ibid., 39, 47.

[13] 'Great Expectations: Aldersgate and the Evidences of Genuine Christianity', Randy L. Maddox, ed., *Aldersgate Reconsidered* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1990), 51, 90.

[14] This is evident in a recent chapter on John and Charles' experiences in May 1738 (William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 36).

[15] Heitzenrater, 'Great Expectations', 90, 91.

[16] Along with Collins, Henry H. Knight III and John H. Tyson join in the argument for a conversionist reading of Aldersgate. See Kenneth J. Collins and John H. Tyson, eds., *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), chs. 1-3.

[17] Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 47, 48.

[18] D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[19] Ibid., 90, 125. Regarding the centrality of assurance to the conversion experience, see pp. 89, 90, 107, 119, 141-42.

[20] William J. Abraham, *Aldersgate and Athens: John Wesley and the Foundations of Christian Belief* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010).

[21] Ibid., 1-2.

[22] Stanley J. Rodes, 'From Faith to Faith: An Examination of the Servant-Son Metaphor in John Wesley's Theological Thought' (PhD Thesis, The University of Manchester, 2011).

[23] Stanley J. Rodes, 'Was John Wesley Arguing for Prevenient Grace as Regenerative?' (*WTJ* 48:1, 2013), 73-85. Rodes consistently maintains that the transition from the servant to the son is a transition from the legal state to the evangelical state. Logically, then, it follows that Aldersgate represents Wesley's transition from the legal state to the evangelical state. On this point, Wesley concurs in his Aldersgate memorandum. See note 25 below.

[24] Ibid., 79, 80, 84. Rodes, 'From Faith to Faith', 224-29.

[25] *Works* 18:215 (note i), 235 (note a), 242 (note b), 245 (notes c and d). Also, embedded in the narrative of Aldersgate memorandum is the comments by Wesley that he transitioned from the natural state to the legal in 1725, and from the legal to the evangelical on 24 May 1738 (cf. §§10, 16).

[26] Hindmarsh, 124-25.

[27] These similarities show up in the many conversion accounts recorded in Wesley's *Journal* and elsewhere (cf. *Works* 18:232-33, 233-34, 235, 273-91). For other examples see Hindmarsh, 89-90, 130-42; Paul Wesley Chilcote, ed. *Early Methodist Spirituality: Selected Women's Writings* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007). In the 'Charles Wesley Letter Collection' (John Rylands Library, Manchester) there are numerous accounts of conversion that exhibit the above characteristics.

[28] For example, Charles went through a similar but much shorter period of doubt over his salvation. See his Journal for 24 May, 27-28 May, 1-3 June, 6 June (Kimbrough & Newport, 110, 112, 114, 115).

[29] 'On Faith' I.11 (*Works* 3:497).

[30] *Works* 3:154-55 note 178.

[31] Cf. Rodes, 'From Faith to Faith', 130.

[32] He did make one slight alteration to paragraph 8 concerning the mystics in 1765 (*Works* 18:246 n 47). This shows Wesley was willing and did alter his account if he thought it was necessary.

[33] See notes 23 and 25 above.

[34] *Works* 18:211, 214, 234. Also, it is noteworthy that Charles Wesley explicitly called his coming to saving faith in Christ 'my conversion' on 23 May 1738, two days after his experience (Kimbrough & Newport, I:109).

[35] Galatians 2:20 is quoted in both sermons to contrast the experience of the son from the servant: 'The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.' See note 33.

[36] *Works* 3:497-98; 4:35-36.

[37] On the evening of 24 May Wesley received assurance and when he awoke the next morning he instantly felt the indwelling Christ, 'The moment I awaked, "Jesus, Master," was in my heart and in my mouth' (*Works* 18:250). It is significant that Wesley's Aldersgate testimony includes what happened on both days, although what happened on 25 May is now ignored and largely forgotten.

[38] Hindmarsh, 118.

[39] Wesley presented his confessions *before* Aldersgate and self-examinations *after* Aldersgate to the public for the same reason—to help guide seekers in their quest for saving faith and to aid believers in their examination of their spiritual condition. See *Works* 18:214 (lines 11-12); 19:30-31(lines 37-1, 9-10). In the *Journal* Wesley continually edits and presents his own experiences with an eye on the spiritual needs of his audience.

[40] Wesley published his Aldersgate testimony in October 1740, during the height of the Stillness Controversy. See my article, 'The Stillness Controversy of 1740: Tradition Shaping Scripture Reading' (*WTJ* 46:1). See also Wesley's preface to his second *Journal* (*Works* 18:218-20).

[41] On 24 May 1738 Wesley stated his sins were 'taken away' (an obvious allusion to John 1:29). Several months later when referring to this same moment, Wesley stated he had 'received such a sense of the forgiveness of my sins as till then I never knew' (4 January 1739, *Works* 19:29).

[42] In his 24 May testimony, Wesley said he was saved from the 'law of sin and death' (Rom. 8:3). In the sermon preached at the same time and in his letter to his older brother Samuel (five months later) he stated he was saved from sin's 'power' or 'dominion' (*Works* 1:123; 25:575).

[43] *Works* 18:239-40.